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DRAMA AND MUSIC

SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS OF THE MONTH

The Greatest Music in the World, and a New Interpretation of It.—Some Adventures with the Futurists: Schönberg, Stravinsky, and Ornstein.—Mr. Shaw's "Major Barbara."

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

THERE should have been what Whitman calls "adornments and feastings" at the Metropolitan Opera House last month when *Tristan und Isolde* was given for the first time this season: for the date of the performance was within a few months of *Tristan's* semi-centennial—it was a half-century ago that the greatest music in the world was first heard in public. The precise date was June 10, 1865. As New Yorkers are not interested in music (without dancing) in the summer-time, we could scarcely have hoped for an anniversary performance of *Tristan* in June; but it seems a pity that the earliest succeeding date when a performance would have been feasible—which happened to be the first day of December—should not have been noted and celebrated as a gala event. The auditorium might have been adorned with smilax; a representative of the management might have delivered a few commemorative remarks from the stage; the ushers might at least have worn *boutonnieres*. But in America we take no note of such merely æsthetic anniversaries. As Mark Twain said concerning our garrulously complaining attitude toward the weather, "nothing is ever done." So nothing was done at the Metropolitan's *Tristan* performance. The auditorium and the ushers wore their usual aspects; the management was inarticulate; and the audience behaved as if the event had been no event at all, or only an ordinary repetition of *Madame Butterfly* or *La Gioconda*.

Yet the première of *Tristan* fifty years ago was an affair of momentous consequence to the art of music. Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate its importance. If there had

been no *Tristan*, what we now know as modern music would not exist. Doubtless we should have had to-day some kind of music; but it would have been a very different thing from that which we actually possess. For modern music without *Tristan* is inconceivable. Look wherever you please in the music of the last three decades: French music or German, Russian or Italian, English or American: and you will find, somewhere,—in a modulation or a melodic turn, a chord or a sequence,—some reminder of *Tristan*. In this score Wagner gave music a new language, incomparably rich, various, and expressive. Through technical devices of unexampled audacity, he liberated music from the constraining moulds of traditional form that had, from the beginning, prevented its attainment of perfect freedom and flexibility of movement. In particular, he demolished the partitions between the different keys. What the admirable Johann Sebastian Bach had once done as a *tour de force*, what Beethoven and Weber and Chopin and Liszt had attempted timorously or experimentally, Wagner did as a settled and regular matter of procedure. His music is as untrammelled, as superbly careless of boundaries and barriers, as a mountain torrent.

The achievement seems to-day very much a matter of course; a thing long familiar, to which we are thoroughly and affectionately habituated. But fifty years ago its effect was convulsing: for some, it was as the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth; for the many, it was sheer chaos. Heinrich Dorn, the eminent pedagogue, declared that in this score, harmony was “used in a way that scoffs at its very name”; of melody there was “practically none.” The great Hanslick found it “bombastic,” “an assassination of sense.” Others saw in it only “higher cat-music,” “a monstrosity,” “a tone-chaos of heart-rending chords.” All of which, and much more of a like order, you may find embalmed, for the edification of posterity, in Mr. Henry T. Finck’s delightful and invaluable *vade mecum* for the devoted Wagnerite, *Wagner and His Works*. To-day, as we have indicated, *Tristan* is milk for babes. The young ladies’ finishing-schools are taken to it in droves. Its once revolutionary dissonances are merely the starting-point for the youthful composer. That famous modulation in the love-duo which evoked an indignant protest from Louis Ehlert, distinguished critic and composer, seems to us as natural and inoffensive as the harmony in *Three Blind Mice*.

Out of this score has been woven the texture of our normal musical thought—it is to-day implicit and fundamental in our musical thinking and our musical speech; so that it is possible to say, with but slight exaggeration, that if you dig deep enough into any modern score (even Brahms is not exempt!), you will come upon the priceless gold, sometimes a little tarnished, of this inexhaustible treasury of inspiration.

We have spoken lightly of the simplicity and familiarity and approachableness that *Tristan* wears for the musical world of to-day—and, in fact, so much a part of the intellectual fiber of modernity has it become that one can scarcely imagine the prodigious effect of its initial disclosure a half-century ago. Yet even to-day how overwhelming is the impression made by this music!—not by its strangeness, its revolutionary quality, but by its ineffable beauty, its terrible eloquence, its crowding miracles of inspiration, the amazing, the incomparable genius that flames through it from the first note to the last. For twenty years we have been listening to it; through sixty performances we have watched its loveliness unfold and have been silent in the presence of its heights and depths. Here indeed are “thoughts that wander through eternity.” Here is an altar and an altar fire before which the proudest must bow in reverence; a temple of the spirit wherein we would fain believe that the divinity that broods within is repeating the sublime affirmation of the Gita: “I am Beauty itself amid beautiful things.”

In the case of such a masterwork as this, a fresh interpretation is an artistic event. *Tristan* has this season a new interpreter in the person of Mr. Arthur Bodanzky, the young Austrian conductor who has come to the Metropolitan to do the work of Mr. Hertz, now engaged in the musical evangelization of California, and, in part, of Mr. Toscanini, at present patriotically occupied in Italy. Many conductors have wreaked themselves upon *Tristan* at the Metropolitan since its consummate interpreter, Anton Seidl, died in 1898. We have had *Tristan* according to Messrs. Schalk, Damrosch, Hertz, Mottl, Mahler, and Toscanini. Of these, Mr. Toscanini, always an exquisite artist and an interpreter of extraordinary gifts, came nearest to satisfying the tests that are applied to conductors of *Tristan* by those who know and love it best. He made it a thing of ravishing beauty and poetry; but he did not make it the

heart-shaking thing of blood and tears, of blended flesh and spirit, of infinite rapture and infinite anguish, that Seidl made it. Mr. Bodanzky is, we believe, a disciple of Gustav Mahler, and his way is Mahler's way. That way is to reduce the prominence of the orchestra and to enhance the prominence of the voices; an admirable way, for besides being pleasant for the singers, it permits the text to be clearly heard, and it enables some of Wagner's loveliest writing to make its full effect. The trouble with this method is—as more than one commentator has pointed out since people began to pay more heed to what Wagner wrote in his scores than to what he wrote in his exegetical excursions—that a good deal of *Tristan* (as of the later music-dramas in general) is in effect a symphonic poem for the opera-house, to which the voice-parts were seemingly joined with whatever felicity the orchestral proceedings allowed. This tonal cabinet-work has been, in the main, very wonderfully and perfectly done by Wagner; but sometimes, as in Isolde's *Liebestod*, for example, it is so far from successful that this part of the score loses nothing whatever (save in the last three measures for the voice, with the final and indescribable F-sharp) by performance in the concert-room. There are a good many other portions of the score which are in a similar case. To magnify the importance of the voices in these passages, and to subdue the torrent of orchestral tone upon which they are borne, is often, therefore, to sacrifice the greater for the less. It is, of course, possible to love the song of the orchestra too much and the song of the singers too little. It is clear that in certain pages Wagner intended to lay chief emphasis upon the voice-parts—as in the passage just before the close of the second act, where Tristan asks Isolde if she will follow him into death. Here the intended effect is clearly that of sustained lyric speech for the voices and mere accompaniment for the orchestra. But such passages are comparatively infrequent; and it is because Mr. Bodanzky fails to appreciate this fact that we find his reading less than satisfying. We have nothing but praise for his poetic sensibility, his skill and taste in nuance, his dramatic fervor, his usually right instinct in the disposition of rhetorical emphasis and in the choice of tempos (though we are still wondering why he took the exultant piping of the shepherd which announces the appearance of Isolde's ship

at so lethargic a pace). We have seldom heard the noble music of King Marke's reproach so touchingly delivered by the orchestra; and where there are no voices to think about—as in the mighty passage which prepares the entrance of Tristan into Isolde's tent—this conductor can be superb. He is ineffectual in the *Liebestod*; and he makes little of that passage which, at times, we feel to mark very nearly the summit of Wagner's achievements as a worker of marvels in tone: the ecstatic intermezzo which accompanies the speechless embrace of the lovers on their couch of flowers, through which the warning tones of Brangäne are heard from the castle tower. Here the distant voice of the watcher should be borne dimly to us across the symphonic flood—it should sound to us, as to the entranced lovers, like a voice heard vaguely through a rapturous dream. Mr. Bodanzky and Mme. Matzenauer (the Brangäne of the performance) made it sound like a conventional operatic solo with conventionally subordinate accompaniment. All the poetry of the scene was dissipated; and so were its musical values.

On the whole, Mr. Bodanzky's *Tristan* is a version in miniature. It is planned on a small scale. Within its limits, it is vivid, beautiful, intense; but it lacks height and breadth and depth.

We have referred to Dr. Hanslick's opinion of *Tristan*. It is diverting to imagine what he would have said about the particular musical problem of our own day: the outgivings of the "futurists" (an unsatisfactory designation, borrowed as it is from a sister art, but sufficiently definite and comprehensible as an indication). If the good Doctor lost his temper over the hideousness of *Tristan*, what sort of reaction would the music of Schönberg and Stravinsky and Ornstein have called forth? It is an amusing but idle speculation. Nowadays reviewers do not lose their tempers when they hear forbidding and nonconformist music—or, if they do, they generally try to conceal the fact. Like Mr. A. B. Frost's militant mule Violet, we have learned our lesson, and have become wary. It is no longer good critical form to call a composer "crazy" merely because you find his music puzzling and repellent. To-day our methods, both defensive and offensive, are more circumspect. We permit ourselves to dismiss the disturbing phenomenon as mere

“noise”; or we adopt the even simpler expedient of denying that it is music at all; whilst those of a suspicious nature are satisfied to question the composer’s sincerity.

But what, after all, is the critic to do when he is confronted with music in which he can find neither beauty nor order?—such music, say, as Mr. Leo Ornstein’s new sonata for violin and piano, wherein many of the harmonic combinations are achieved by the naïve procedure of sounding together as many of the notes of the chromatic scale as the pianist can strike? The trunks of certain of Mr. Ornstein’s chords in this work bear branches sprouting to left and right, all heavily laden with notes like the fruit on an apple-tree. To aid the perplexed executant in playing these chords on the keyboard, the composer presents explanatory diagrams and footnotes, in which you are told how to hit certain keys with the thumb, others with the fingers, others with the palm. Now what, we say, is the most tolerant of critics, with the most hospitable of ears, to say in the presence of such music, if he finds in it neither eloquence nor design? Obviously, he should say, with The Raven, only that and nothing more. To say that Mr. Ornstein is crazy would be presumptuous; to say that he is insincere would be impertinent; to say that his music is mere “noise,” or that it is not music at all, would be unscientific—for no one really knows the difference between “noise” and “music.” The critics of fifty years ago who said that *Tristan* was “noise” rather than “music” were not ignoramuses: they were men of culture, of wide æsthetic experience. Let us not forget what Professor Saintsbury says in his *History of Criticism*. If we change the term he uses, “words,” so that it reads “tones,” we shall get this: “I do not know—and I do not believe any one knows, however he may juggle with terms—why certain tones arranged in certain order stir one like the face of the sea, or like the face of a girl, while certain other arrangements leave one absolutely indifferent or excite boredom or dislike.” That is undeniably disheartening, but it is as undeniably true. Such being the truth, what does it profit us to affirm that Mr. Ornstein’s staggering collocations of tones are mere “noise,” to deny that they are “music”? The fact that those unfortunate æstheticians who so confidently alleged the same thing about Wagner are now known to have been wrong, is enough, in all conscience, to frighten the most redoubtable critic of to-day—is enough, perhaps,

to scare him into a politic dishonesty: for what if Mr. Ornstein is another Wagner, or at least another Strauss? Yet the prudent commentator will think twice before pretending admiration for that which he does not really like, since it is always possible that Mr. Ornstein is *not* a Wagner, nor yet a Strauss; and how much better it is that we should seem to posterity to have known too little, rather than to have known, in the phrase of the late Artemus Ward, "so much that ain't so"?

So we shall be content with saying that we do not like this *dernier cri* of musical futurism. It seems to us impotent rather than ugly—singularly sterile, singularly dull. But we have heard lately other music, by other "futurists," in which we find a value and interest that we miss in this sonata of Mr. Ornstein's.

We in New York have been treated, during the past few weeks, to a kind of progressive exhibition of futuristic music. We have heard the *Kammersymphonie* of Schönberg, produced by the Society of the Friends of Music, and the *Pelléas et Mélisande* of the Austrian insurgent, played by the Philharmonic; and only the other day the Flonzaleys exhibited to us the *Three Pieces for Quartet* by Igor Stravinsky, which are so new that the ink is barely dry upon the manuscript.

It must be confessed that, after Mr. Ornstein's horrendous sonata, all of this music seems rather tame. Schönberg's *Pelléas*, indeed, is "futuristic" only in spots; the rest of it is desiccated Wagner or diluted Strauss; and in none of it do we find either the slightest suggestion of inspiration or the least intimation of the unique dramatic, poetic, and emotional quality of Maeterlinck's play. Much of the score is trite and banal; its passion is rhetoric; its attempts at pathos and loveliness are insipid and sentimental—higher salon-music. But this was not a typical Schönberg piece—it is fourteen years old. The *Kammersymphonie* (dating from 1906) more nearly represents the real and controversial Schönberg, the formidable ultra-modern of to-day, though it is probably regarded with contempt by its creator. The opening portion of the work seemed to us abortive, and at times imitative of other men's styles; but in the middle section and the close there are pages of subtle and piercing beauty; thoughts that are both new and impressive.

Both of these compositions, however, would sound conventional if played on the same program with the *Three Pieces for Quartet* produced by the Flonzaleys. This was program-music in little, though Stravinsky, with the coyness displayed by many writers of delineative music, has been amusingly indirect in his manner of announcing the programs of which his pieces are illustrations. He chose to confide them privately to the gentlemen of the Flonzaley Quartet, who in turn confided them to Mr. Daniel Gregory Mason, who in turn confided them to the audience from the platform of Æolian Hall just before the performance. The first piece, it appears, aims to portray a scene in the desert, with a group of peasants singing and dancing to the accompaniment of primitive instruments. The second is a scene in a cathedral, with chanting priests and organ music. The third tells the eternal tragedy of Pierrot, who must perform his tricks though his heart is breaking. These pieces (Stravinsky calls them "Grotesques") are remarkable for their power of imaginative projection. They are almost absurdly short—the first takes less than a minute to perform, the others three or four each; yet within their extraordinarily brief compass, each one succeeds in painting a scene, in establishing a mood. You are in the desert with the peasants; in the cathedral with the chanting priests; you are watching the tragic-comedian, Pierrot. Music that can do this is not to be laughed out of court. Whether, aside from its pictorial and dramatizing vividness, it has value, we do not feel sure. As music *per se*, the first and third movements seem unimportant; but there is in the second movement, at least (the cathedral scene), a touch of something that we almost dare to call beauty.

In all of this writing of Schönberg's and Stravinsky's that we have been considering, there are recognizable links with the great traditions of music, both classic and modern. This, after all, is a very mild kind of "futurism" indeed: if these two æsthetic adventurers would learn the veritable speech of to-morrow, let them go to school to Mr. Ornstein, with his sonata for violin and piano under their arms.

Certainly destiny fights on the side of Bernard Shaw. A few weeks ago Miss Grace George and her associates produced at The Playhouse Mr. Shaw's *Major Barbara*. Now *Major Barbara* was written ten years ago, when there was

no war—or rather (like Sarah Bernhardt's celebrated baby), "such a little one" that it did not count; yet, hearing the play to-day, you would swear it was written only yesterday, so perfectly does it serve as a commentary on present conditions. In it you will find discussions about the morality of force and the crime of inefficiency (Mr. Shaw calls it "the crime of poverty"); about the munition-manufacturers and the ethics of cannon-making, the sweetness and light that may be disseminated through the agency of gunpowder. You will even find the word "preparedness" (though this, to be sure, occurs in Mr. Shaw's preface). If this is not a case of prophetic inspiration, it must prove that, as we observed, the gods do watch over this fortunate mortal.

Major Barbara has, of course, long been available for Shavian zealots in book-form (it was published in 1907); yet to see it for the first time in the theatre is to encounter almost a new thing—at least that is what happens when you witness the delightfully expert and vivifying production at The Playhouse. Before we saw it on the stage, we were not convinced of its place among the best of Mr. Shaw's performances. We no longer have any doubts. This superb comedy is one of the treasures of the contemporary drama.

It is an inexpugnable tradition of theatrical criticism that Mr. Shaw cannot create character—that his people are mere puppets, mere "mouthpieces" for the author's ideas. Like many other critical traditions, it isn't so. It is almost as absurdly wrong as some of the famous traditions affectionately cherished by critics of music, who are perhaps more passionately attached to fallacious *clichés* than any other order of æsthetic appraisers—you will still find them insisting, with undaunted certainty, that in Wagner the music is the handmaid of the drama; that Debussy "renounced melody," and that he lacks virility; and that all the great composers are dead. And similarly, in the theatre, this droll tradition regarding Mr. Shaw's inability to create character persists, and will of course continue to persist. But let the theatre-goer of virgin mind (if there be any such) honestly ask himself if he believes that "Dolly" Cusins, and Lady Brit, and "Snobby" Price, and Barbara, and Bill Walker, not to speak of the great Undershaft himself, are mere "mouthpieces" for the author's ideas, or if they are authentic and vivid personalities? And then observe with what mastery Shaw has set these char-

acters in opposition; and what a fine and veritable sense of drama (spiritual and emotional) he gives you at the end of his second act through this tension and conflict of wills. And when you have observed these things, consider the sustained intellectual gusto and power and virtuosity of the whole thing—its eloquence, its wisdom, its poetry, its exquisite irony, its unflagging wit, its many-sided comprehension, its passion, its tenderness (none the less visible for being so elaborately suppressed). Where else in the contemporary theatre will you get as much? And if you *must* have beauty and elevation, why, that too you will find here, if you listen carefully at the close of the last act to the dialogue of Miss George's perfectly achieved Barbara and to Mr. Ernest Lawford's no less perfectly achieved Dolly, alias Euripides.—An inimitable play; a memorable performance.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.